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Abbe

GIANNETTO, PLAYED BY JOHN BARRYMORE AND FAZIO, HIS FRIEND, PLAYED BY E. J. BALLANTINE IN "THE JEST," A PLAY OF THE PERIOD OF THE ITALIAN RENAISSANCE, BY SEM BENELLI, THE SETTING DESIGNED BY ROBERT EDMOND JONES

"The Jest"

BY HEYWOOD BROWN

VARIOUS observers of the trend of modern drama have this season, from time to time, predicted a romantic revival on the American stage a prediction which did not flower until the production of "The Jest." Sem Benelli's play has the quality of being sufficiently unlike anything New York has seen for some years to stand as the fingerpost to a new school of popular drama. Ground has been broken for it carefully. Its savagery would hardly be appreciated if the theatre had not previously progressed so far in another direction. But, under present conditions, the very violence of "The Jest" is one of its chief assets. The play comes to a public which has been surfeited with sweetness. A few years ago one of the chief producers in the variety world undertook to popularize his product by emphasizing the fact in all his advertisements that he was presenting "polite vaudeville" and even the "impresario" of a burlesque show took evident pride in announcing that his was "refined burlesque." Even the World War did not serve to make the popular drama any more harsh or intense. Every theme employed about the conflict seemed to be a sentimental one and big guns and air guns and air raids and the rest were employed merely to afford a background for pretty love scenes. Now, whatever may be said against "The Jest," this play can hardly be called refined or polite, in spite of its colorful prose and opulent blank verse. Nothing quite so ferocious has come to us. It has seized upon the æsthetic values of lust and murder and has rolled a red carpet into a drab theatre. It is probably true that "The Jest" is not a great play. Benelli is not sufficiently interested in the psychology of his characters to write true tragedy nor yet enough preoccupied with mere

action to devise a perfect melodrama. The play will not fit into either pigeon-hole. It seems to be now melodrama and now tragedy. Occasionally the swaying from the point of view of the tragedian to that of the melodramatist, or vice versa, is a bit disconcerting and hurts the play.

Benelli begins his story of a subtle vengeance by a very careful and masterly analysis of the motives of Giannetto, the part played by John Barrymore. In the first act one of the longest speeches ever written by a modern author is entrusted to this character. In spite of the length the speech holds the attention completely because it is not only shrewdly devised but is magnificently played by John Barrymore. Giannetto tells of the slights which have been put upon him by Neri and continues until everyone in the audience realizes the venom which accumulated in his heart. With the entrance of Neri, we hear less about motives and see much more action. The plot unfolds before our eyes. We see the weaker man gradually spreading his net for the bully. Things begin to happen so swiftly that we do not care, very much, what either man is thinking.

But after two acts Benelli begins to fear that his audience may have forgotten just why Gianetto is so intent upon the destruction of Neri and his brother. Or perhaps he feels that he should tell them of certain changes which have occurred in the mental attitude of the plotter during the development of his plot. Accordingly the mood of the piece swings suddenly in the third act from violent action to subtle mental processes of a rather rare type of mind. It is difficult to carry an audience from one mood to the other although it is well to remember that Hamlet's soliloquy occurs not long after some scenes of



LIONEL BARRYMORE AS NERI IN "THE JEST" Abbe

vigorous melodrama. Nevertheless, the reverse of this process is probably easier to the average mind in the theatre, and minds in the theatre undoubtedly have a tendency to be average. There is no great difficulty in becoming interested in action after an introduction in which the mental processes of the characters are sketched but when one has seen brawls and blood and violent love-making he is not well attuned to subtlety. Fortunately the psychological diversion in the third act is only an interlude and Benelli soon unsheathes the daggers again.

And yet with all its astounding detail of adventure and its magnificent color of costume and scenery "The Jest" is not exactly romantic. It lacks the heroic gesture of romance. The people it pictures for use are not finer than those of the workaday world in many essentials. From another point of view the play is romantic, because whatever its char-

acters may lack in ethical virtue they make up for in being passionate, vivid and violent beyond the possibilities of the modern world. No dramatist of the season has given such marvelous opportunities to actors and probably no playwright of recent years has had his confidence so admirably rewarded.

The tragic elements of the play are largely in the keeping of John Barrymore and he makes them eloquent. It is a curious thing that an actor whose voice is not among the fine speaking voices of our stage should be able to hold the attention of an audience with sheer narration as John Barrymore does in the beginning of the first act. Probably the answer lies in the fact that although he does not bring vocal beauty to the part he brings a fiery intensity. He is able to make his hate credible at every moment in the play. He is able to create the impression of malevolent cunning and to hold it. Then, too, if Barrymore does not possess an intrinsically melodious voice he reads verse admirably. He never grows overconscious of rhythm. Lionel Barrymore is the chief factor in upholding the melodrama of "The Jest." He plays with tremendous pace and spirit and he injects a certain joviality, savage and sinister though it may be, which helps to keep the horrors of the play from getting beyond all bounds. Moreover, Lionel Barrymore although playing the part of a brute makes him engaging enough in his strength and courage and bravado to bring a certain element of sympathy into the play which is no bad element for any drama aiming for popular success.

Robert Edmond Jones has fashioned one of the most beautiful settings that New York has been privileged to see. Wisely and shrewdly he has built his scenery around his players and not in front of them. It is well to note the fact that some magnificent settings have marred plays rather than made them because they did not tend to draw the attention of the audience to what was happening but rather to distract it. These sets by Jones are different. They

are an organic part of the play reflecting the atmosphere of the period of the Medici in which they are placed. Everything which he has built or painted has a relation to the play's movement. When

the arts unite in a common effect there must be some medium through which the alliance is made. In this case the credit should go to Arthur Hopkins. "The Jest" marks him as a true master of stagecraft.



Abbe

MISS MAUDE HANAFORD IN THE ROLE OF GINEVRA